

Post 3/29/95 We Already Have Term Limits

WHAT TERM LIMITS supporters want is what is happening *without* term limits. Of the 435 members of the House, 219—a majority—have been there for *less than five years*. Turnover has been especially dramatic in the last two elections: The House class of 1994 included 87 first termers, the class of 1992 included 110. The Senate, with its members enjoying six-year terms, has turned over more slowly but still considerably. Eleven freshmen were elected in 1994 and 12 in 1992, accounting for nearly a quarter of the Senate. All by themselves, without any law compelling them to do so, voters have shaken up Congress a great deal in a very short time.

The House should vote this week to reject constitutional amendments that would impose term limits because they are an unnecessary interference with the freedom of voters to elect whom they want. Term limits would also make Congress a less democratic place. By robbing Congress of the expertise that members who manage to get reelected can develop over many years, term limits would concentrate expertise—and, thus, power—in congressional staffs, in the executive branch and in this city's growing cadre of paid lobbyists.

It's easy enough to understand why so many voters tell the pollsters they want term limits: They are clearly unhappy with the performance

of Congress, which is why they have voted so many members out and encouraged others to retire rather than face defeat.

It's much harder to accept at face value the loud speeches made yesterday by veteran House members against "the kind of career orientation members have developed," as Rep. Bill McCollum (R-Fla.) put it. Mr. McCollum was elected to Congress in 1980. If he doesn't like the "career orientation" and truly believes in 12-year term limits, why did he not step down in 1992?

Writing in these pages yesterday, Speaker Newt Gingrich declared that the United States "no longer needs or desires a class of permanent career politicians." Mr. Gingrich first ran for Congress more than 20 years ago and has been in the House since 1979. Is it just possible that Mr. Gingrich is himself a rather skilled member of that "class of permanent career politicians" and that he sharpened those skills over his last decade and a half of service?

Term limits are expected to be defeated this week because enough House members have the courage to match their words and their votes to what their own career decisions already prove: that they believe there is nothing wrong with choosing to dedicate a large chunk of one's life to congressional service. We suspect that many of the career politicians who vote the other way will nonetheless be grateful for the result.